

SEAN KELLY

"The Lookout," *Art in America*, November 2015.



Robert Mapplethorpe



Robert Mapplethorpe: Untitled (Peter Berlin), ca. 1974, black-and-white Polaroid, photograph approx. 5¾ by 4¼ inches © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. Courtesy Sean Kelly, New York.

In "Unique," approximately 25 framed polaroids produced between 1970 and 1975 document Mapplethorpe's formative understanding of the photographic medium. He casually captured now-famous friends such as Patti Smith and Judy Linn, and also created compositionally experimental still lifes featuring struggling bohemians with quotidian objects. Intimate images of frequently nude acquaintances—perhaps lovers—play with the edge that separates art and pornography. Titled by the subject's first name and location, these photos carefully balance artistic authority with the subject's self-image to present individuals, not anonymous objects of desire. Mapplethorpe solidified these themes as his career progressed, developing a moralized aesthetic. Later work further probed the tension between formally classic modes of representation and pornographic content to challenge taboos surrounding sadomasochism and homoeroticism, consistently raising issues of censorship and obscenity.